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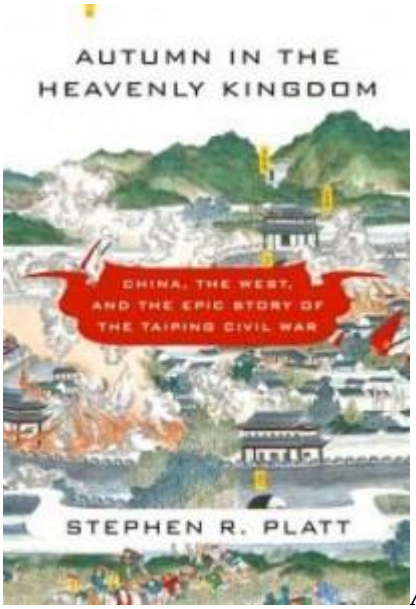

A big new China book to hit shelves in recent weeks is Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom: China, the West, and the Epic Story of the Taiping Civil War*, written by University of Massachusetts, Amherst historian Stephen Platt. Platt places the Taiping Rebellion in a global context, emphasizing its importance to American and European observers of the conflict, whose economic ties to China made them keenly interested in the country's domestic situation.* Autumn in the Heavenly Kingdom *also offers new insights into how the Taiping Rebellion tied into Chinese internal politics, particularly the ways in which the Taiping rebels sought to justify their planned overthrow of the Manchu Qing rulers on ethnic grounds. In the excerpt below, Platt describes how foreigners pieced together small bits of information about the early Taiping Rebellion to offer their own interpretations of what the conflict signaled for China—and the world*

The Preacher's Assistant

Hong Kong in 1852 was a diseased and watery place, a rocky island off the southern shore of the Qing Empire where the inhabitants lived in dread of what one described as "the miasma set free from the ground which was everywhere being turned up." A small British settlement sat between the mountains and the bay, but the emerald and sapphire glory of the scene belied the darkness below the surface. Leaving the concentration of godowns, military barracks, and trading firms along the colony's nostalgically named central streets (The Queen's Road, Wellington Street, Hollywood Road), one could find the grandest vistas in the gravel paths that led up the coast into the hills, but the European settlement soon gave way to scattered Chinese houses among fields growing rice and sweet potatoes unchanged in the decade since the British took the island as their prize in the Opium War. Some of the wealthier merchants had built opulent mansions in

those hills, with terraced gardens commanding a view of the harbor and town. But as though their builders had strayed too far from the protection of the settlement, the inhabitants of those houses sickened and died. Marked as "homes of fever or death," the ghostly manors sat silent and abandoned, their empty gaze passing judgment on the settlers below.

One of those settlers was Theodore Hamberg, a young Swedish missionary with a thin chinstrap beard that set off his delicate, nearly effeminate features. He was blessed with a lovely voice, and in his youth in Stockholm he had sung together with Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale." But while Lind went on to conquer the opera halls of Europe and America, bringing suitors such as Frédéric Chopin and Hans Christian Andersen to their knees along the way, Hamberg's life took an entirely different path. His strong tenor found its destined outlet in preaching, and in 1847 he left his native Sweden to sail to the opposite end of the world, to this malarial colony of Hong Kong, with the sole purpose of bringing the Chinese to their knees after a different fashion.

Theodore Hamberg might well have lived his life in obscurity, for his proudest accomplishments meant little to anyone beyond a small circle of Protestant missionaries. He was one of the first Europeans in his generation to brave the Chinese countryside, leaving the relative safety of Hong Kong to preach in a village outside the Chinese trading port of Canton a hundred miles up the Pearl River (though for health reasons he finally returned to the colony). He was also the first to learn to speak the dialect of the Hakka, or "guest people"—a gypsy minority thickly populous in south China. All of that might have meant little to anyone in the world outside except that one day in the late spring of 1852, one of his converts from the countryside brought a guest to meet him, a short, round-faced Hakka named Hong Rengan who had a remarkable story to tell.

The strangest thing about this Hakka, Hamberg recalled from their first meeting, was how much he already seemed to know about God and Jesus despite the fact that he hailed from well beyond the narrow reach of the Hong Kong missionaries. Hamberg listened with curiosity as Hong Rengan gave a baffling account of the events leading to his arrival in Hong Kong. He spoke of visions and battles, armies and congregations of believers, a heavenly prophet from among the Hakkas. He had, or at least so he claimed, been hunted by the agents of the Qing dynasty and had lived in disguise under an assumed name. He had been kidnapped, had escaped, and had lived for four days in the forest, six days in a cave. None of it made much sense, though, and Hamberg confessed, "I could form no clear conception of the whole matter." Not knowing what to make of the story, he asked Hong Rengan to write it down, which he did, and then—though Hamberg had expected him to stay for baptism—he left without explanation. Hamberg put the sheets of paper with Hong Rengan's story into his desk and turned his mind to other matters. He would think little of them again for nearly a year, until the spring of 1853 when the news came that Nanjing had fallen in a torrent of blood, and Hamberg realized that the strange events sketched out in Hong Rengan's tale meant more than he had ever imagined.